

Township Times

The Newsletter of the
Middletown Township
Historical Society

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Middletown's Twin Brook Zoo

by Randall Gabrielan

The mention that a zoo once existed in Middletown still amazes the typical listener three quarters of a century after it closed. But, indeed, a zoo once occupied the south side of Hwy. 35, approximately filling the area between today's Twin Brook and Woodland Avenues. Although hardly a facility to compare with the great zoos of America, it had the pretentious name of Twin Brook Zoological Park. The zoo was planned, built and closed in less than a decade. Inspired by Oliver W. Holton's love of animals, the place ended in his personal tragedy caused by two of his beasts. The Holton story is a fascinating chapter of Middletown's history.

Oliver Holton bought over 200 acres of the Twin Brook Farm from John Tierney in 1919. The tract had been named by an earlier owner, Lillian Maehl, for two brooks of near-equal length which were located on the property. Mrs. Maehl built the residence on the property, the substantial Italian Renaissance Revival structure located at 89 Spruce Drive. The house would have a major role in the fate of the zoo.

Holton's beginnings were both modest and practicable. A graduate of the Cornell agriculture program, he raised birds, notably pheasants, for market. They were in demand as decorative objects on country estates, by the State of New Jersey for release for hunters and by restaurants. He exhibited his birds, which won a number of prizes. Holton's mother raised prize cattle and was reportedly moving them to the Middletown farm. His birds included canvasback ducks, which were said to be hard to raise in confinement, ornamental swans, geese and Hungarian partridges. Holton's taste for the exotic was

exemplified by importing a pair of flamingos from Africa. The hazards of local confinement were foretold by his losing one in a fight with a swan.

Holton expanded the farm into a zoo in 1925, believing that his overseas animal farm sources would enable him to build a private zoo on a greater scale than had ever been previously attempted. A 40 acre section of the tract was reported as set aside for the zoo operation, presumably the enclosures. He opened on June 25, the date confirmed by a double panel advertising post card that Holton published. He claimed to have over 800 specimens including African lions, Malayan tigers, Indian leopards, and black panthers, other cats, along with Indian elephants, camels, zebras, monkeys, apes, alligators and snakes and a variety of birds. One favorite was the monkey at the gate who collected admissions from visitors. Unfortunately, he escaped and was killed by an automobile. Escaping animals would prove the undoing of the zoo.

It was the odd ones that attracted attention beginning with an emu from farm days. The emu is an Australian terrestrial bird best known to stamp collectors and crossword puzzle buffs. It amused visitors by swallowing half an apple in a single gulp. Molly, the root beer-drinking American black bear was a crowd pleaser. Holton claimed a superlative for Judy, advertised as the smallest elephant in captivity. He displayed Himalayan thars, a mammal described as a brown mountain goat, a species now out of its native land which is alternately revered for sport-hunting or reviled as a pest. Their resemblance to our familiar farm goat is probably comparable to a bobcat's relationship to a housecat. Holton's farmer, Louis Jones,

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had been staring at the thars through an open window in their barn while the thars stared back. Suddenly one leaped through the opening knocking Jones down, but apparently not hurting him. A local reporter claimed the animals were "full of life and constantly on the go." One suspects Holton put spin on the story before spin was invented, or at least so-called.

Everything changed on August 2, 1926, when a turning point event brought great notoriety to the zoo, but began its downward spiral to a short, unhappy life. A full-grown, spotted male leopard from Singapore escaped from its shipping cage, eluded capture and sent the surrounding countryside into panic. Workers had been assembling a permanent cage when the beast worked two bars loose and broke-out unnoticed. Its absence became known only when the men returned with the completed cage. An initial, but unsuccessful, search focused on the heavily wooded Holton estate. The public was then warned, including notice on two radio stations, as there was genuine fear that the leopard would harm a person. His ravaging was confined to treating the farming community as one big buffet.

One early search was on the extensive Brookdale Farm estate in Lincroft, then owned by Lewis Thompson. It was unsuccessful, but every unidentified shadow or animal paw print was regarded as a possible sighting. One of the most reliable reports was made by 8-year-old Margaret Ellison, daughter of a farmer, who excitedly told of seeing what she called a big dog with spots. Of course, it was gone by the time her father arrived. The initial searchers believed the animal was nearby and would soon be cornered or killed, but as it remained elusive, the band of hunters grew. Soon much of the populace was seeking the leopard, many with guns. Others were fearful of venturing out, some fearing the hunters more than the hunted.

Holton offered a \$100 reward for capture of the leopard, dead or alive. However, it was realized that "alive" was

not a viable option as someone could get hurt. He also exhibited a stuffed leopard, so people could see what one looked like. At the time, few were aware of a leopard's appearance; Miss Ellison's identification was not really naive after all. There were many reports of sightings. Although most were erroneous, each sent a pack of gun-toting searchers to the scene. One, Adam Decker, claimed to have taken a shot at him, believing he may have wounded the beast. The mystified populace reacted in strange ways, claiming to hear noises that leopards do not make and see tracks with claw marks, which do not appear on cat prints.

The escape made the front page of the New York papers, initially for the escape, but then to comment on whether the claim was real or a hoax to garner publicity. A Times headline on August 9th claimed "Deny Leopard Hoax; Call Cat A Menace". Holton was angered by the accusation he would concoct a publicity campaign over a false claim as he was concerned over public safety. The public remained alarmed and amazed over the cat's elusiveness. Some firms used the escape for advertising purposes. Tetley's in Red Bank offered a "leopard surprise package" containing \$1.25 to \$3 worth of toys for "only" \$1, but with an incentive of receiving another \$8 surprise package if a customer bought one in which a leopard was "hiding". The Federal Fur Dying Corporation of New York offered to cure the leopard's hide for free.

The search went on, employing various means. The Department of the Interior sent a quart of oil of catnip to place on bait meat as the catnip-tainted food would make the leopard docile after eating it. They knew it was tried at the zoo. Tethered "bait" animals were tied-up in areas of suspected sightings as armed men waited in hiding. Nothing worked; the leopard remained at large for over two months. Some were not surprised as they are known for stealth. There was plenty of cover in the extensively wooded surrounded areas, while food was plentiful, especially farm chickens and

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Twin Brook Zoo (cont. from pg. 2)

ducks, along with other small game. People remained apprehensive, although leopards did their best to avoid people.

The leopard was finally caught in a trap on October 15 and killed by Willard F. Irons on a small farm at Island Heights, Ocean County, about 45 miles from the zoo. The family had been losing ducks for two weeks. Partially eaten remains cast suspicion on an animal, but not a leopard. Irons was eager for his reward and called Holton, but Oliver was skeptical, having been led out on too many futile chases. Willard followed instructions to carry the animal to the zoo; he did and collected his \$100. The locale of the capture was astonishing and remains a mystery. One theory claims the cat's lengthy trek followed a rail line. A new publicity boon was immediate. Holton sought apologies from members of the press that wrongly accused him of seeking notoriety. More importantly, paid admissions soared within hours from a public eager to see the dead animal. After the zoo closed for the season, Holton sent his animals to Atlantic City for exhibition on the Steel Pier, thankful no one was hurt following the great escape. He opened the zoo in the spring of 1927 with a group of new animals which included two leopards and two lions. An escape that year would end in tragedy.

The Holton household also consisted of his wife Mildred and their two sons, 5-year-old George, known as Buddy, and Thomas, 2-1/2, in the summer of 1927. They had at least one dog in the house, a German shepherd named Trix, who may have been a pet, but who also was a "jealous guardian of the Holton boy." The zoo included a pair of lobo wolves who were raised in captivity. They, too, were at times treated as if domesticated by employees who petted them. Trix visited the zoo and was familiar with the wolves.

The female wolf escaped on July 22 while being transferred to another enclosure. She made her way to the Holton home, found Tommie playing on the lawn with Henry Mazza, the son of Alma, the Holtons' maid. The wolf

attacked the Holton boy, who escaped and made his way into the house where Mrs. Mazza attended to his wounds; they were apparently not serious. However, while she was searching for a weapon, the dog Trix opened a door which permitted the wolf to enter. The wolf grabbed Tommie, took him outside and, perhaps stimulated by the blood from the earlier wounds, resumed his attack with a violent fervor, tossing and biting the boy. Mrs. Mazza, who was alerted by her son to the second attack, went to the aid of the helpless boy and slammed the beast with a blow from a gun butt. The stunned wolf left. Mrs. Mazza sought help, but was thwarted by a non-working telephone. Help soon arrived and the boy was taken to Dr. Frank Goff in Red Bank who, after treating him, recommended taking the boy to the nearby Woodley Hospital; an operation was performed there. Tommie's wounds, punctured lungs and a torn abdomen, proved fatal. Oliver, after finding the wolf at a nearby pool, shot him.

The tragedy was personal, but the outcry was public. The local prosecutor, John J. Quinn, denied he would be investigating in view of the absence of a complaint and the personal nature of the loss. In Middletown, where the populace was still wary about the earlier leopard escape, the investigation was directed at the public safety issue. Alternate claims for the zoo as public asset or nuisance continued for two months while the park remained open. Oliver Holton, a broken man after his son's death, decided the issue by closing the zoo; its last day was Sunday, October 16, 1927. The short, unhappy life of Middletown's Twin Brook Zoo was over.

Did you know?

Chieftain, the Red Bank National Guard cavalry horse, is buried in a small garden behind a private house in the River Plaza section of Middletown. Originally buried in "full tack" (with bridle and saddle) on a high mound on an adjacent undeveloped lot in the late 1920's, his remains were removed to its present location when a house was built on the lot in 1978. A granite headstone marks his grave.

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Thanks so much!

Many thanks to Bernice Maguire for making the big red bows and the beautiful mantel wreath, and to Domonic Koehler of Home Renovation & Repairs for climbing his 28-ft ladder to wrap the red ribbons around the columns for the holidays.

Thanks to all who came out on a freezing evening to make this year's Holiday Party such a success! We had lots of great discussions and lots of great food and holiday cheer.

Thanks also to Joseph Azzolina and Food Circus Super Markets, Inc. for the cookie platters at our monthly meetings.

And thank you to all our new and returning members - we couldn't do it without your support! Don't forget to renew your membership today if you haven't already done so.

Calling all volunteers

Learn about the history of Middletown Township while "digging for treasure" - volunteers are needed to help out in our research library. Please call 732-291-5610 to lend a hand.

Calendar of Events

All events are free of charge, and everyone is welcome to attend. Light refreshments are served.

Feb. 21 - Historic maps

March 21 - Margaret Thomas Buchholz, author of "New Jersey Shipwrecks: 350 years in the Graveyard of the Atlantic"

April 18 - to be announced

May 16 - Edward J. Raser, compiler of "New Jersey Graveyard and Gravestone Inscriptions Locators, Monmouth County"

Check our website for the latest updates:
www.home.earthlink.net/~middletownhist

Congratulations!

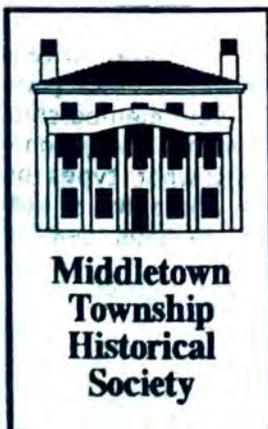
Patricia Coughlin was named Citizen of the Year for 2004 by the N.J. Blind Citizens Association (also known as Camp Happiness in Leonardo) at their 94th anniversary awards dinner in December. Pat has been volunteering at their thrift shop for 4 years and lends a hand at the Camp's dinners. As their program states: "Everyone enjoys working with Pat. She has such a pleasant personality and is always smiling." Pat also volunteers her time with the Historical Society and we think she's great, too! Congratulations, Pat!

Wish List

Letter- and legal-size 4-drawer metal filing cabinets; map case

This will be my last issue as editor. It's been a great experience! Keep sending in those article ideas for future issues.

-- Laura M. Poll



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Dedicated to researching, collecting, and exhibiting the history of Middletown Township

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Meetings: 7:30 p.m., third Monday of the month
MacLeod-Rice House, Croydon Hall
Intersection of Leonardville Rd. & Chamone Ave.
Leonardo section, Midd. Twp., Monmouth County

Membership Dues per calendar year	
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